that would prompt the public to spend money for a benefit that did not exist.

The company, with its Slim-Fast Food Cos. affiliate, was the seventy-first largest national advertiser recently, spending $137.5 million. Its major brands were Slim-Fast, Ultra Slim-Fast, and Dextran diet and nutrition products. It also marketed NP27, Cortizone-5, Cortizone-10, Sportscreme, Sleepinal, Aqua-Ban, Breathe Free, Tempo, Lactogest, Silk Solutions, and Arthritis Hot.

And it still sells Aspercreme. By that name, the FTC did not stop the usage because it decided that requiring an accompanying disclosure would be sufficient to dispel the falsity. The disclosure must state prominently and conspicuously that Aspercreme does not contain aspirin.

But it does not work.

Advertising and Ethics

Phillip Nelson

The Market System and Advertising

There are two possible routes one can take to ethics. One can exhort others to take account of social well-being in their behavior—"to love one another" and act accordingly. Or one can try to design institutions such that will, indeed, benefit society, given the motivations that presently impel their behavior. Most economists, whatever their political position, adopt the latter view; ethical behavior is behavior that, in fact, benefits society, not necessarily behavior that is motivated to benefit society.

Those of us who advocate the market as an appropriate institution are following the lead of Adam Smith: that the market, more or less, acts as if there were an invisible hand, converting individual actions motivated by the pursuit of private gain into social benefit. The selfish employer, for example, callously firing employees when he no longer needs them, helps in the reallocation of labor to activities where it is more useful.

This is not the stuff of poetry. In novels—and quite possibly in the interpersonal relations upon which novels generally focus—selfish people act in ways disastrous to those around them. But novels are hardly the basis for determining social policy, though novelists and their compatriots, literary critics, are often in the forefront in the espousal of "social causes." They have been the consciences of society. Because of their focus on motivation, they have generated a guilt complex when guilt is totally unjustified.

It must be admitted that the market is not a perfect instrument, that the invisible hand wavers a bit. Some individual actions will not lead to social well-being. However, popular perceptions tend to exaggerate market imperfections. For example, the available evidence indicates that the monopoly problem is not terribly serious in the United States. More importantly, the popular view fails to evaluate the problems of alternative institutions. The record of government regulation to make the market behave has been distinguished by case after case where the cure has been worse than the disease, where often there has been no disease at all.

I want to look at the ethics of advertising, given this perspective. Advertising is ethical not because of the motivations of its practitioners but because of the consequences of its operation. The invisible hand strikes again! The market power of consumers will force advertisers to act in ways that benefit society. Advertising will by no means be an "ideal" institution. But it will do an effective job of getting information to consumers.

Advertising bores its critics not only because its practitioners are selfishly motivated. The advertising itself is often distasteful. Celebrities endorse that brand that pays them the highest price. Advertisers lie if it pays. Advertisers often make empty statements. Nobel prizes for literature have not yet been awarded to the classics of the advertising arts. But the crucial question is not whether advertising is aesthetically satisfying, or whether its practitioners are noble, or even whether they occasionally lie.

The question is whether advertising generates social well-being. Some of the former questions are not irrelevant in determining the answer to the latter question. In particular, as I discuss later, the role that truth plays in generating socially useful advertising is an important question.

Advertising and Information

Before resolving the fundamental ethical issue about advertising, it is important to understand how advertising behaves. I support a simple proposition about the behavior of advertising: that all advertising is information. This is not a statement with which the critics of advertising would agree. What bothers them is that advertising is paid for by the manufacturers of the brands whose products are being extolled. How can information be generated by such a process? Clearly, some kind of mechanism is required to make the self-interested statements of manufacturers generate information. But such a mechanism exists—consumer power in the product markets.

The nature of consumer control over advertising varies with the character of consumer information. Consumers can get some information about certain qualities of products prior to purchase. For example, they can try on a dress, find out about the price of a product, or see how new furniture looks. I call these “search qualities.” In the case of search qualities, a manufacturer is almost required by the nature of his business to tell the truth. The consumer can determine before he buys the product whether indeed this is the dress or the piece of furniture that has been advertised; and in consequence, it will pay the advertiser to be truthful.

This is a situation where the famous ditty of Gilbert and Sullivan would be appropriate:

This haughty youth, he tells the truth
Whenever he finds it pays;
And in this case, it all took place
Exactly like he says.

Now, there are other qualities that the consumer cannot determine prior to purchase. It is very difficult for the consumer to determine the taste of a brand of tuna fish before he buys the tuna fish, or to determine how durable a car will be until he’s experienced it; but even in these cases, the consumer can get information about a product. The character of his experiences when using the brand will generate information to the consumer. This information will not be useful for initial purchases, but it will govern whether the consumer repeatedly purchases the brand or not. The repeat purchase of consumers provides the basis of consumer control of the market in the case of “experience qualities.”

In this case, there will be certain characteristics of the advertising which are truthful. It will pay the advertiser to relate correctly the function of the brand. It pays the manufacturer of Pepto-Bismol to advertise his brand as a stomach remedy rather than as a cure for athlete’s foot because, obviously, he is going to be able to get repeat purchases if Pepto-Bismol does something for stomachs and people are taking it for stomachs. If they’re taking the stomach remedy for athlete’s foot, they’re in trouble. So the effort to get repeat purchasers will generate a lot of truthfulness in advertising. Another example: it pays the manufacturer of unsweetened grapefruit juice to advertise the product as unsweetened. This is the effective way to get repeat purchases; hence people can believe it.

There are other qualities about the brand for which the incentive of truthfulness does not exist. It pays the manufacturer of Pepto-Bismol to advertise his brand as the most soothing stomach remedy even if it were the least soothing stomach remedy around. It pays somebody to say that a piece of candy tastes best even if the candy has an unpleasant taste. Even here, however, there is information for the consumer to obtain through advertising. The advertising message is not credible, but the fact that the brand is advertised is a valuable piece of information to the consumer. The consumer rightly believes that there is a positive association between advertising and the better buy. The more advertising he sees of the product, the more confidence he has prior to purchasing the product. Simply put, it pays to advertise winners. It does not pay to advertise losers. In consequence, the brands that are advertised the most heavily are more likely to be the winners.

The mechanism that is operating is the repeat purchasing power of the consumer. Brands that are good after purchase will be brands that consumers buy more. In consequence, there is a negatively
sloped demand curve. People buy more as the price per unit of utility of a good goes down, even when it takes experience on the part of consumers to determine this utility. As quantity goes up, the amount of advertising will also go up. This is a well-established relationship. The positive association between quantity and advertising and the negative association between quantity and price per unit of utility generates a negative association between advertising and price per unit of utility. In other words, the ‘better buys’ advertise more; and, in consequence, the amount of advertising provides information to consumers.

Considering that we have no direct measure of “better buys,” there is a good deal of evidence to support this proposition. First, it pays a firm to expand its sales if it can produce what consumers want more cheaply than other firms. It can increase its sales either by increasing advertising or lowering prices. I maintain that it does both at the same time, just as plants usually increase both their capital and their labor when they expand output on a permanent basis. But the critics say that the larger selling brand advertises more; therefore, it charges more to cover the costs of advertising.

The only way the critics could be right is if diminishing returns in advertising did not exist. By diminishing returns in advertising, I mean that the more a manufacturer spends on advertising, the less he gets in additional sales per dollar of advertising. When there are diminishing returns, the advertising of the larger selling brand is less efficient; it gets fewer sales per dollar. When advertising is less efficient in that sense, the larger advertiser will have a greater incentive to get additional sales by lowering the price. With diminishing returns in advertising, then, the larger selling brand both advertises more and gives greater value per dollar. There is considerable evidence that there are, indeed, diminishing returns in advertising.²

There is a second strand of evidence in support of my position. One can successfully predict which products get advertised more intensively by assuming that advertising provides information in the way I have described. It can be shown that it requires more advertising to provide the indirect advertising for experience goods than the direct advertising of search goods. Indeed, the advertising/sales ratios are greater for experience goods than search goods.

There is another important piece of evidence that winners are advertised more. If it is true that the larger-selling brand provides better value per dollar on the average than smaller-selling brands, wouldn’t it pay a brand to advertise its rank in its product class more, the higher the rank? Consumers would prefer to buy top sellers rather than bottom sellers. The evidence is overwhelming that more brands say that they are Number One than declare any other rank.

One could argue, I suppose, that consumers are brainwashed into believing that larger-selling brands are better, when the contrary is true. But how could this be? A lot more advertisers have an interest in brainwashing the consumers into believing the contrary. Yet, the “big is beautiful” message wins. The only reasonable explanation is that this is the message which is confirmed by the consumers’ own experiences. The brainwashing explanation is particularly hard to accept, given the industries in which brands most frequently advertise their Number One status. It pays consumers to make much more thoughtful decisions about durables than non-durables because the cost to them of making a mistake is so much greater in that case. Yet, the “I am Number One” advertising occurs more frequently for durables than for non-durables.³ Even more convincing is the evidence that the advertising of Number One rank is not confined to possibly gullible consumers. That same message is used in advertising directed to businessmen. They too must have been brainwashed if the critics are right. But such soft-headed businessmen could hardly survive in the market.

The evidence seems inescapable: larger-selling brands do, on the whole, provide the better value per dollar. The evidence also shows—and all would admit—that larger-selling brands advertise more. In consequence, the more advertised brands are likely to be the better buys.

It is frequently alleged that advertised brands are really no better than non-advertised brands. A case that is often cited in this connection is Bayer Aspirin. But aspirins do, indeed, vary in their physical characteristics. Soft aspirins dissolve in the stomach both more rapidly and more certainly than hard aspirins. In consequence, the soft aspirins are better. They are also more expensive to produce. It is no accident that the most heavily advertised brand of aspirin is a soft aspirin. Of
course, there are also non-advertised soft aspirins that sell for less than Bayer Aspirin. But the issue is not whether the best unadvertised aspirin is as good as the most heavily advertised aspirin. The issue is whether purchasing one of the more heavily advertised aspirins at random gives one a better product, on the average, than getting an unadvertised aspirin at random. The existence of unadvertised soft aspirin, when the consumer does not know which aspirin fits into that category, is of little help to the consumer.

Advertising can provide this information without consumers being aware of its doing so. Advertising as information does not require intelligent consumer response to advertising, though it provides a basis for such intelligent response. Consumers who actually believe paid endorsements are the victims of the most benign form of deception. They are deceived into doing what they should do anyhow.

It does not pay consumers to make very thoughtful decisions about advertising. They can respond to advertising for the most ridiculous, explicit reasons and still do what they would have done if they made the most careful judgments about their behavior. "Irrationality" is rational if it is cost-free.

Whatever their explicit reasons, consumers’ ultimate reason for responding to advertising is their self-interest in so doing. That is, it is no mere coincidence that thoughtful and unthoughtful judgments lead to the same behavior. If it were not in consumers’ self-interest to respond to advertising, they would no longer pay attention to advertising.

NOTES

1. This is borne out by data from the Internal Revenue Service Source Book of Income, 1957. For every industry, firms with larger sales advertise more.
3. In the May, 1955, issue of Life magazine, there were twelve durable and three non-durable, "I am Number One" advertisements.

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Advertising and the Social Conditions of Autonomy

Richard L. Lippke

In The New Industrial State, John Kenneth Galbraith charged that advertising creates desires rather than responds to them.1 His thesis raised in stark terms the issue of who is controlling whom in the marketplace. Yet, Galbraith did not provide a rigorous analysis of autonomy, and his remarks about the effects of advertising on individuals were often more suggestive than carefully worked out.

The claim that advertising is inimical to the autonomy of individuals has been taken up and discussed by philosophers, economists, and social theorists. Typically, these discussions provide first, an analysis of autonomy, and second, some empirical conjecture about whether or not advertising can be said to subvert it. The focus of most of these discussions has been on whether or not advertising can be justly accused of manipulating individuals into wanting and therefore purchasing specific products or services. Less attention has been paid to what I believe is another major theme in Galbraith’s writings—that mass-advertising induces in individuals beliefs, wants, and attitudes conducive to the economic and political interests of corporations in advanced capitalist societies like the United States. Galbraith’s concern seems to be not only that advertising is hostile to individual autonomy, but that it is an aspect of the ability of corporations to dominate the lives of other members of society.

What the effects of mass-advertising are on individuals is, it must be admitted, ultimately an empirical question. In spite of this, I will try to show how we might reasonably conclude that advertising undermines autonomy, especially under the social conditions that exist in advanced capitalist countries like the United States.2 Recent discussions of advertising have not only failed to consider

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one crucial way in which advertising might subvert autonomy; they have also ignored important aspects of the broader social context of advertising. Specifically, they have paid scant attention to the ways in which other social conditions also undermine autonomy. My analysis will emphasize the complex interplay between and amongst the various social conditions that affect the autonomy of individuals.

In addition to providing an analysis of autonomy, I will show how autonomy requires social conditions for its development and continued viability. I will show how the content and methods of persuasive mass-advertising are likely to suppress the development of the abilities, attitudes and knowledge constitutive of dispositional autonomy. Yet, my view is that its full impact on autonomy should be considered in light of the ways in which political and economic institutions distribute the other social conditions of autonomy.

My primary focus will be on persuasive as opposed to informational advertising. Though the distinction is not a sharp one, I take the latter to involve information about the features, price, and availability of a product or service. Persuasive advertising, in contrast, often contains very little direct informational content about a product or service. Whereas the former presupposes some interest on the part of individuals in the product or service, the latter seeks to cultivate an interest. This typically involves tying the product or service to the satisfaction of individuals’ other, sometimes subconscious desires. It seems fair to say that current informational advertising is woefully deficient. The information that is presented is often incomplete or misleading, or both. As a result, even informational ads are deceptive or manipulative at times. To that extent, they undercut the abilities of persons to make informed choices and may be destructive to the intellectual honesty that is one of the constituents of dispositional autonomy. Also, in the context of massive persuasive advertising, informational advertising is likely to reinforce the content of its persuasive counterpart. Nonetheless, the two can be roughly distinguished and my remarks will be predominantly directed against persuasive advertising.

Implict in my analysis will be the claim that one criterion for judging social orders is the extent to which they provide all of their members with the social conditions of autonomy. I will not attempt to argue for this claim here, though it is by no means an uncontroversial one. I note only that my claim is a relatively modest one—that this is one criterion for judging social orders. Critics of my approach may point out that many individuals seem to lack a strong desire for the sort of autonomous life I elucidate. We should not, however, be misled by this appearance. Many persons will assent to the principle that, ceteris paribus, the choices of individuals ought to be respected. Yet, as Lawrence Haworth shows, it makes little sense to urge such respect where peoples’ choices do not reflect an autonomous way of living. This suggests there may be sound reasons to hold that autonomy is a central value. Its value may be obscured for many people by, among other things, persuasive mass-advertising.

One reason that we value autonomy is relevant to Galbraith’s thesis that advertising is an aspect of the dominance of large corporations over the lives of individuals in advanced capitalist societies. Persons who are nonautonomous seem much more likely to be dominated by others. Such domination need not be consciously intended or effected by the more powerful. They may simply act in ways that they perceive to be in their own interests. Nonautonomous individuals may respond by passively assimilating the interests of the more powerful. I suspect that something like this is true when it comes to corporations, advertising, and its effects on individuals. Though I cannot hope to fully support Galbraith’s thesis here, I will touch on it in numerous places throughout my discussion.

Recent discussions of advertising and autonomy are inadequate because they fail to isolate the crucial way in which the content of advertising might be subversive to autonomy. Roger Crisp, a critic of advertising, develops and tries to support the claim that ads are manipulative in an objectionable fashion. He argues that advertising “links, by suggestion, the product with my unconscious desires for instant power and sex.” Crisp claims that persuasive advertising leaves persons unaware of their real reasons for purchasing a product, and so precludes their making rational purchasing deci-

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sions. Crisp then argues that "many of us have a strong second-order desire not to be manipulated by others without our knowledge, and for no good reason." If persons become aware of how persuasive advertising affects them, by locking onto their unconscious desires, they will likely repudiate the desires induced by advertising. Such repudiated desires will not be regarded by individuals as theirs. Hence, Crisp believes he has shown how advertising is subsersive to autonomy.

Crisp's approach seems to attribute both too much and too little power to advertising. Too much, because there is reason to doubt that most adults are manipulated by particular ads in the way Crisp describes. Perhaps children are so manipulated at times, and this is cause for concern. Most adults, though, seem quite able to resist what I will call the "explicit content" of ads. The explicit content of ads is the message to "buy X," along with information about where it may be purchased, its features, and how much it costs. Most individuals learn at an early age that many ads are out to persuade them, even manipulate them. They become wary of ads and this explains why they often resist their explicit content quite easily. Even if persons do have the second-order desire Crisp attributes to them, it is not the explicit content of ads that manipulates them without their knowledge. The challenge is to develop an account of how advertising can have power over individuals who very often realize ads are designed to manipulate them.

This brings us to the way in which Crisp's account attributes too little power to advertising. In addition to encouraging persons to buy brand X, many ads have what I will term an "implicit content" that consists of messages about, broadly speaking, the consumer lifestyle. This lifestyle consists of a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, expectations, and aspirations that I will, in due course, attempt to summarize. While individuals may be aware that they are being sold particular products, the crucial issue is the extent to which they are aware of being "sold" this implicit content. As Samuel Gorovitz remarks, "it is an error to focus too narrowly on the cognitive content of advertising by looking at the truth of its claims and the validity of its inferences." Instead, we should consider how the images and emotional content of ads affect our beliefs, aspirations, expectations, and attitudes. Crisp does not really consider where some of the unconscious desires ads supposedly lock onto might originate.

In an important defense of advertising, Robert Arrington argues that it rarely, if ever, subverts the autonomy of individuals. He maintains that a desire is autonomous so long as it is endorsed by an individual on reflection. In other words, the (first-order) desire is autonomous if the person has a second-order desire to have and satisfy it. Advertising, he contends, rarely leads persons to have first-order desires for products that they subsequently repudiate. Perhaps, as we saw earlier, this is because many individuals resist the explicit content of even the most manipulative ads.

Arrington also argues that ads do not violate autonomy by inducing persons to make irrational choices based on faulty or inadequate information. The only information needed for a rational choice, on his view, is information relevant to the satisfaction of individuals' particular desires. He claims that ads often provide the information relevant to the satisfaction of such desires.

Even if we accept his arguments as stated, Arrington's defense of advertising is seriously incomplete. He ignores the very real possibility that it violates autonomy not by manipulating persons' desires and choices with respect to particular products, but by suppressing their capacities to make rational choices about the implicit content of ads. If advertising induces uncritical acceptance of the consumer lifestyle as a whole, then Arrington's vindication of it with respect to the formation of particular desires or the making of particular choices within that lifestyle is hardly comforting. Arrington consistently ignores the possibility that the beliefs, attitudes, and desires particular ads cater to may themselves be influenced by ads in ways that ought to trouble anyone who values human autonomy.

II

As a first step in building my case, I offer an account of autonomy that draws on recent work on the concept. Robert Young notes that a person has "dispositional autonomy" to the extent that the person's life is "ordered according to a plan or conception which fully expresses [that person's] own will." In a similar vein, Gerald Dworkin suggests that autonomy is a "global" concept: "It is a feature
that evaluates a whole way of living one's life and can only be assessed over extended periods of a person's life. Autonomy is a matter of degree, an achievement that depends in part on the capacities and virtues of individuals, and in part, as we shall see, on the existence of certain social conditions.\(^\text{13}\)

Dworkin's analysis employs the well-known distinction between first and second-order desires and abilities. He summarizes his account as follows:

Putting the various pieces together, autonomy is conceived of as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values.\(^\text{14}\)

Similarly, Lawrence Haworth interprets autonomy in terms of the notion of "critical competence."\(^\text{15}\) Autonomous persons are competent in the sense of being active and generally successful in giving effect to their intentions. They are critical in that they deliberate not only about means to their ends, but about the ends themselves, including those of central significance in their lives. While not engaged in continuous rationization, they are nonetheless disposed to critically examine their beliefs, desires, attitudes, and motivations. They subject claims they are confronted with and norms others urge on them to rational scrutiny.

Importantly for our purposes, autonomous individuals should be understood as ones who scrutinize the political, social, and economic institutions under which they live. These institutions, and the patterns of habit and expectation they establish, shape the possibilities individuals can envision and determine the areas in which they can exercise their autonomy. Autonomous individuals want to shape their own lives. Hence, of necessity they will be interested in the social forces and institutions that significantly affect their lives, especially since these forces and institutions are often humanly alterable.

Autonomy is not a capacity that develops in isolation from the social conditions that surround individuals. It requires individuals to have certain abilities, motivations, and knowledge (or at least

What is the importance of noting the numerous social conditions of autonomy in the context of an analysis of persuasive mass-advertising? Very simply that advertising, as a possible threat to autonomy, does not exist in a social vacuum. We cannot assume that individuals encounter mass-advertising with already finely-honed skills of critical competence. The extent to which they do so is a function of the distribution of other social conditions of autonomy. The absence of social conditions of autonomy in one area will often reinforce or exacerbate the effects of their absence in other areas. Thus, in any attempt to gauge how much of a threat to autonomy persuasive mass-advertising represents, we must consider these and other background social conditions of autonomy.

In advanced capitalist countries like the United States, many individuals spend significant portions of their working lives in conditions destructive to autonomy. As Adina Schwartz and others have argued, hierarchical, authoritarian management structures, typical in such industrialized countries, thwart the autonomy of workers in obvious ways.\(^\text{16}\) Very few have meaningful input into the decisions affecting their working lives. The tasks they perform are determined by management, as are the methods used in carrying them out. Work technology is decided by management, as are productivity quotas, discipline procedures, and criteria for evaluation. Workers are not allowed or expected to exercise even the minimal autonomy of determining the ends they will pursue or the
means used to pursue them. This is one way in which the institutions of advanced capitalism enable corporations to impose their interests on individuals. **EDUCATION**

Often connected with the character of work is unequal access to quality education. While certain ways of organizing work may simply deny individuals avenues along which to exercise their autonomy, lack of education or poor quality education undermines it in more basic ways. Reduced educational and cultural experiences often result in restricted intellectual abilities and dispositions. The kinds of rational skills needed for autonomy and the motivation to employ them seem to be the products of a liberal education in the classic sense. Individuals who lack ready access to such education are likely to have an impoverished awareness of different ways of conceiving of their lives and their social relations. This makes them ideal candidates for the tutelage in the consumer lifestyle effected by mass-advertising.

Much of that which is sponsored by advertising on TV, radio, and in magazines is hardly such as to encourage the development of autonomy. Program content on commercial networks is often mindless, melodramatic, simplistic in its approach to the problems of human life—or worse, violent, sexist, or subtly racist. Even commercial network news programs seem to emphasize entertainment. Dramatic visual images, “sound bites,” and fifteen-second summaries of events are the rule. Commercial sponsorship of the media opens the way for the exercise of subtle control over program content. But the more likely effect of that sponsorship is an emphasis on gaining and holding an audience. That which cannot be sold does not get sponsored. Yet, I think we should be wary of those who claim that what the public does not choose to consume in the way of mass media reflects its autonomous choices. Other factors, such as lack of education, mindless work, and the impact of advertising may figure in such choices. In any case, what ads are wrapped around must be factored into any analysis of their likely effects.

We should also pay attention to the ways in which institutions distribute political power, and therefore, the abilities of individuals to act on and realize their interests. In this regard, the existence of formally democratic political structures is often misleading. Notoriously, access to political power depends on wealth or economic power in various ways. Here again, the political and economic institutions of advanced capitalism facilitate the dominance of corporations and their constituents.

**IV ADVERTISING SUPPRESSES THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF AUTONOMY**

I come, at last, to the central argument of my paper. My strategy in what follows will be to amass considerations that make a plausible case for the claim that persuasive mass-advertising is detrimental to autonomy. If there is a case to be made, it is not one that can be made by showing how advertising falls into categories that are traditionally viewed as hostile to autonomy—coercion, deception, manipulation, and brainwashing. While advertising is sometimes deceptive and often manipulative, and in some ways akin to brainwashing, its overall character is not easily assimilable to any of these. I am inclined to think that the way to conceptualize its character is in terms of the notion of suppression. Advertising suppresses autonomy by discouraging the emergence of its constitutive skills, knowledge, attitudes, and motivations.

One general feature of mass-advertising is simply its pervasiveness. Individuals are inundated with ads, no matter where they go or what activities they engage in. David Braybrooke refers to the “aggregative and cumulative effects” of ads. The quantity of ads and their near inescapability are such that even the most diligent will be hard-pressed to avoid absorbing some of their implicit content. Many television shows and magazines feature or cater to the consumer lifestyle and this reinforces the implicit content.

The pervasiveness of ads is often coupled with an absence of views that challenge or reject their implicit content. In assessing the likely impact of mass-advertising, we must pay attention to societal measures to counter its effects. For instance, in the United States, there are few if any public service announcements urging individuals to be wary of ads, exposing the tactics of manipulation and seduction ads employ. Also, it is unlikely that such announcements would ever be repeated often enough, or have anything like the appeal of ads which promise persons sex, power, prestige, etc., if only they will buy the associated products. It seems clear that our society’s educational and religious in-
stitions, which might serve to counter ads, are ill-equipped to raise and deal with complex issues such as the nature of the good life. These are issues which ads greatly oversimplify and offer a virtual unanimity of opinion about. In many cases, attempts to educate children (and adults) about ads are sporadic and unsophisticated. To the extent that this is so, it is unlikely that such education will be forceful enough to effectively counter the advertising barrage.

Stanley Benn writes that one of the unique features of rational suasion is that it invites response and criticism. It presupposes the possibility of a dialogue between or amongst the parties involved. Yet, we might wonder how far most individuals are from having a meaningful dialogue in their lives with advertising. What competing conceptions of the good life has advertising vanquished in an open, rational dialogue? If individuals lack appealing and coherent alternatives to what ads tell them about how to live, they cannot make critical, rational choices about such matters.

It is bad enough that advertising has the character of a loud, persistent bully. What is worse is that it is often not directed only at adults who might be capable of responding critically. The concern about the effects of advertising on the vulnerable, especially children, is not simply that many ads are so manipulative that they trick the vulnerable into wanting things they do not need or which are not good for them. It is also that the implicit content of ads gets absorbed by children and habits are set up that carry forward into their adult lives. The ways in which they habitually perceive their lives and the social world, the alternatives they see as open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves and others, are all shaped by advertising, perhaps without their ever being aware of it.

I now turn to an analysis of the implicit content of persuasive mass-advertising. This content is a function of both the methods of conveying messages in ads and the messages conveyed. What follows are some of the key facets of this implicit content. I do not claim that my analysis is exhaustive, only that it is thorough enough to support my contention that the character of advertising is such as to suppress autonomy.

I begin with that facet of the content and methods of ads that Jules Henry refers to as the encouragement of "woolly-mindedness." Ads subtly encourage the propensity to accept emotional appeals, oversimplification, superficiality, and shoddy standards of proof for claims. Evidence and arguments of the most ridiculous sorts are offered in support of advertising claims. Information about products is presented selectively (i.e., bad or questionable features are ignored), the virtues of products are exaggerated, and deception and misinformation are commonplace. The meanings of words are routinely twisted so that they are either deceptive or wholly lost (e.g., consider the use of words like 'sale' or 'new and improved'). Also, ads encourage the belief that important information about our lives must be entertainingly conveyed and such that it can be passively absorbed.

All of these are what we might term "meta-messages." They are messages about how to deal with messages, or more precisely, about how to approach claims made by others. They are messages that tell individuals, among other things, that they cannot believe or trust what others say, that anything (or nothing!) can be proved, that evidence contrary to one's claims may be ignored, and that words can mean whatever anyone wants them to mean. They tell persons that success in communication is a matter of persuading others no matter how it is done. Such attitudes about thought and communication starkly oppose the habits and attitudes constitutive of critical competence: clarity, rigor, precision, patience, honesty, effort, etc. Henry remarks that advertising would never succeed in a world filled with logicians. Though we may not want such a world, we should be aware of how advertising promotes sophistry and attitudes supportive of it.

Complementing the meta-messages is the persuasive emphasis on ease and gratification. As Henry points out, austerity and self-restraint are anathema to advertisers. Mass production requires the existence or ready and willing consumers. Lifestyles contrary to consumption are either absent from ads (and from TV shows) or are ridiculed in them. Predominant messages in ads are "take it easy," "relax and enjoy yourself," and most especially, "buy it now!". In moderation, there may be nothing objectionable about such messages. However, where not balanced by other messages, and so not made liable to critical examination, they encourage attitudes subversive to autonomy. In
order to formulate, assess, and carry out life-plans of their own choosing, individuals must possess self-control and seriousness of purpose. They must also have the capacity to resist temptations or momentary distractions.

More insidious, though, is a further implied message—that persons ought to let advertisers show them how to live the good life. What could be more inviting than a life that demands so little beyond ease and gratification (especially to children, who are less attuned to the values of self-control and delayed gratification)? Freedom is divorced from self-direction and equated with passivity and consumption. Control over one's life becomes simply the ability to satisfy one's consumer desires. Alternative conceptions of freedom are drowned out. Opposing lifestyles are saddled with a burden of justification. Those who resist the easy gratifications of the consumer marketplace are likely to be perceived as square, eccentric, boring, or life-denying. The scorn of others thus becomes a barrier to the critical examination of life.

While one of the main messages of advertising is to accept a lifestyle of ease and gratification, individuals who buy into that lifestyle cannot be allowed to relax if that means not buying products. Fear and insecurity are the motifs of advertising. There are always new products and services to be sold and individuals must be convinced that they will not experience true or complete gratification until they buy this or that product. As John Waide remarks, advertising cultivates and thrives on “sniper group pressure.” Other persons are portrayed as constantly ready to judge negatively those who have not tried the newest product that promises to make their lives more appealing in some fashion. Advertising is fundamentally divisive in this regard. It encourages the view that social relationships are competitive, that persons are out to “top” one another rather than help and support one another. The internalization of this competitive model is likely to deprive individuals of the care and counsel of others, two things that vitally contribute to the sustained critical examination of their lives. Individuals need others to provide them feedback about their conduct and projects, as well as to present them with alternative beliefs, outlooks, and commitments.

Numerous writers have commented on the confusion about values ads promote. Many ads tell individuals that if they will only buy X, they will acquire friendship, self-esteem, sex appeal, power, etc. Collectively, these ads tell individuals that they will be able to satisfy some of their most important desires (ones Waide refers to as being for “non-market goods”) through the purchase and use of consumer products. Where they have bought these products and still not found the relevant satisfaction, advertising has a ready answer: buy more or better products!

It is doubtful that there are areas of peoples' lives where clear thinking is of more importance. It is equally doubtful that consumer products can make a significant contribution to the satisfaction of the desires for such nonmarket goods. More to the point, at best ads can only distract individuals from clear thinking about such things as why they lack self-esteem or why they feel powerless, or why their friendships or marriages are unsatisfactory. At worst, they can fill individuals' minds with pseudo-truths or pseudo-values bearing on issues of central significance in their lives. Numerous examples come to mind: how women are encouraged by ads to conceive of their self-worth in terms of unrealistic standards of physical beauty; how having fun is portrayed in ads for beer, wine, and alcohol; ideas about nutrition courtesy of the junk food industry; how racial disharmony, homosexuality, and poverty are missing from the social worlds of ads; and so on.

Finally, in light of my earlier claim that autonomous individuals will be disposed to critically scrutinize the institutions they live under, it is important to point out how the portrayal of consumption as the good life serves a political function. This portrayal provides individuals with standards and expectations against which to judge not only their own lives, but the institutions that shape and mold their lives. Consumption is presented as the reward for “making it,” and as a way of ameliorating, if not curing, boredom, powerlessness, lack of self-esteem, etc. Political and economic institutions then come to be measured by the extent to which they provide individuals access to consumer goods. Of course, there is no guarantee that, judged against this criterion, a society’s political and economic institutions will fare well. In this way, even mass-advertising may provide individuals with a basis for criticizing their institutions.

However, the basis is a very limited one. Individuals may only be concerned with whether they might get more or less consumer goods if institu-
tions were organized differently (or run by members of a different political party). Other, competing criteria against which to judge institutions, are likely to have a hard time getting a hearing in societies dominated by mass-advertising. In this way, advertising serves as a force that legitimizes the political and economic status quo. It deadens individuals to a more extensive critical scrutiny of the institutions they live under. The ways in which their political and economic institutions distribute the social conditions of autonomy, and therefore allow the economic interests of corporations to dominate their lives, are rarely considered or seriously discussed.

One of the supposed virtues of advanced capitalist societies where mass-advertising is ubiquitous is that they afford individuals a wide range of choices. Within the ambit of the consumer lifestyle, that may be so. But, what about some of the more basic choices individuals have about how to live their lives or about how to organize their political and economic affairs? Are these choices many individuals in such societies realize they have, let alone can conceive of an array of alternatives about? My contention is that many in such societies are in no position to make critically competent choices about these more basic issues and that advertising significantly contributes to their inability to do so.

V

It is not enough for defenders of advertising to respond to the preceding analysis by pointing out that some individuals seem to resist absorbing much of its implicit content. No doubt this is true. It is also true that many interactions of a more mundane sort between and amongst individuals fall short of being fully autonomous ones. The use of emotional appeals is widespread, as are other forms of manipulation. There are many insecure or servile individuals who are influenced by others in ways that likely fail the tests of critical competence.

Few would suggest that societies should be judged harshly for allowing such interactions to go on. Yet, it might be argued, why should we think societies ought to treat persuasive mass-advertising any differently? Why not, instead, think it reasonable to let individuals watch out for themselves in the face of mass-advertising? After all, some seem to.

This is a formidable objection, but it fails to take account of the differences between individuals’ encounters with advertising and their encounters with other individuals. The latter typically have three features that the former lack. First, encounters with other individuals are often either voluntarily sought out or at least voluntarily maintained. Yet, advertising is not easily avoided. It begins to work its influence on individuals when they are young and it never lets up. It is omnipresent. Second, even where individual encounters with other individuals are not voluntarily (e.g., familial or work relationships), they typically serve some important and function in individuals’ lives. This is less obviously true with respect to persuasive mass-advertising. Third, encounters with other individuals, if unsatisfactory, can be altered by the participants. Individuals can ask, or insist, that others not deceive or manipulate them. Sometimes this works. With advertising, individuals can, at best, try to shut it out or be wary of it. It is not an agent whose “conduct” can be altered by direct appeals.

Also, the fact that some individuals manage to resist the effects of persuasive mass-advertising might be explained by their having greater access to the other social conditions of autonomy (e.g., education). Surely that does not show that a society need do nothing about an institution in its midst that arguably plays a very significant role in suppressing the autonomy of what is perhaps a very large majority of its members. As Tom Beauchamp notes, a source of influence need not be completely controlling in order to be an object of concern.28

Defenders of advertising might at this point argue that the actions of corporations are protected by the moral right of free speech. Joseph DesJardins and John McCall maintain, however, that we should distinguish commercial speech from moral, religious, and political speech. They argue that some types of speech are more valuable to human life than others. Moral, religious, and political speech “contribute to the pursuit of meaning and value in human existence,” while commercial speech “in offering an item for sale appears a rather mundane concern.”29 The latter only encourages persons to deliberate about various and competing consumer choices.

DesJardins and McCall are mostly concerned about providing a rationale for governmental efforts to regulate deceptive commercial speech.
Their argument relies on a conception of human autonomy similar to my own. Still, it seems to me that the autonomy must allow for speech and to a certain extent that political leaders are to serve their citizens' wishes on all matters to the government.

In short, since democracy implies that government officials must respect the wishes of the people, the government's role is to report and criticize their government's policies. Additionally, Desjardins and McCullough fail to discuss the idea that the people are the master of their government. Therefore, the government's role is to report and criticize their government's policies.

For these arguments, I will concentrate on three central ones. First, there is what Schauer calls the "argument from truth." This argument alleges that there is a causal link between freedom of speech and the discovery of truth. Schauer suggests we modify this argument by emphasizing the elimination of error so that, as he puts it, "the truth may not be told, but the development of true pragmatistic and philosophical thought may be accelerated." Thus, in a sense, we cannot accept without independent consideration the judgment of others as to what they should believe. Nevertheless, I think that most mass-advertising.

Second, the argument from freedom is Schauer's "argument from freedom." This argument alleges that there is a causal link between freedom of speech and the discovery of truth. Schauer suggests we modify this argument by emphasizing the elimination of error so that, as he puts it, "the truth may not be told, but the development of true pragmatistic and philosophical thought may be accelerated." Thus, in a sense, we cannot accept without independent consideration the judgment of others as to what they should believe. Nevertheless, I think that most mass-advertising.

Worse, Schauer's argument from freedom appears to be driven only by the need to defend the right to say what they choose, rather than by an interest in the development of truth. Schauer repeatedly claims that the provision of information is the province of the state. The state is alleged to have the duty to inform citizens of the risks and dangers they face. Schauer, however, is right to note that all three of these arguments presuppose that it is government's function to make decisions for us, that the government is not to be trusted to hold that individual must be free from government's interference in these decisions. The autonomy is a right of the people and is not to be denied to them.
Similar remarks hold for the argument from democracy. Especially relevant here is the political content of persuasive mass-advertising, with its emphasis on consumption-as-the-good-life as the standard against which to measure political and economic systems. More insidious than its insistence on this essentially status quo-preserving standard is its implicit denial of the value of political debate and activity. Consumption is where individuals are told they will find satisfaction, and a host of pseudo-issues about such a life are offered as the central focus for individuals’ care and concern.

Finally, if advertising is inimical to autonomy in the ways I have claimed throughout this paper, it is obvious that the argument from autonomy cannot be invoked on its behalf. Those who defend persuasive mass-advertising on the basis of its contribution to individual choice would seem to have an extremely limited notion of the range of choices that individuals have about their lives.

Virginia Held makes the important point that in societies like the United States, it is no longer adequate to construe the right to free expression simply as a right not to be interfered with:

But in a contemporary context this leaves those with economic resources free to express themselves through the media: they can buy time on TV or own a station, they can buy up or start a newspaper, and so on. At the same time, those without economic resources can barely be heard.  

Held’s concern is with a society’s taking steps to enable its members to freely express themselves. Though she does not directly address the issue of persuasive mass-advertising, it is likely that she would view the nearly unchecked power of corporations to express their interests through the media with alarm.

VI

What to do about persuasive mass-advertising is, I think, a daunting problem. Throughout my analysis, I have insisted that we consider the effects of advertising in conjunction with the effects of other social conditions that might impact on autonomy.

The question we must ask ourselves, then, is what changes in our political and economic institutions are necessary in order to provide all persons with the social conditions of autonomy. Since advanced capitalist countries like the United States are now plagued in various ways by the dominance of corporate interests, we might hope that enhancing the social conditions of autonomy for all persons will result in the cultivation, expression, and realization of more varied (and autonomous) interests.

While some will think that the only way to accomplish this result is to abandon capitalism altogether, I want to consider changes that are somewhat more modest. First, in order to modify the organization of work so as to provide a venue for the realization of worker autonomy, we might adopt the sorts of worker participation mechanisms institutionalized in countries like West Germany and Sweden. These mechanisms guarantee workers participation in the economic decisions that vitally affect their lives. Second, we would need to guarantee to all individuals the level and quality of education necessary for them to develop the skills, dispositions, and knowledge constitutive of dispositional autonomy. Third, we would need to take steps to lessen if not eliminate the influence of wealth and economic power over the decisions of democratically elected political officials. This might include such things as the development of a public financing scheme for all political campaigns and the institutionalization of mechanisms to guarantee the independence of government officials from those they regulate or purchase products and services from. Fourth, steps must be taken to divorce the media from their almost exclusive reliance on commercial financial support and to provide individuals with increased access to the means of expression. Virginia Held offers a number of valuable proposals about how to effect these ends.

These include having more public financing of the media and having commercial sponsors buy non-specific time on the airwaves. Both measures would reduce the pressure to produce programming that is successful according to narrow commercial criteria. The hope is that this will lead to greater experimentation in the media, and thus to the creation of a more diverse cultural life.

Obviously, the preceding changes would need to be considered at greater length. But, let me instead turn to advertising and its role in the sup-
pression of autonomy. As an aspect of the dominance of corporate interests in advanced capitalist societies, it is important to neither over-estimate nor under-estimate its significance. On the one hand, without complementary changes of the sort just discussed, attempts to regulate or restrict advertising seem likely to have only minimal impact on the development and maintenance of autonomy. At most, such regulation or restriction would eliminate one barrier to autonomy. On the other hand, it may be argued that the salutary effects of such complementary changes will be undermined if no steps are taken to regulate or restrict persuasive mass-advertising. Workers might remain imbued with the mentality promulgated in ads and so unwittingly express views conducive to corporate interests. Attempts to cultivate a more educated populace would still be opposed by the barrage of ads with its implicit content.

Unfortunately, it is hard to come up with a feasible approach to the regulation or restriction of advertising. Since the thrust of my argument has been against persuasive advertising, it might be suggested that we attempt to legislate a distinction between it and informational advertising. The idea would then be to restrict if not eliminate the former while permitting the latter. Perhaps simply providing information about the price, character, and availability of products and services poses little threat to autonomy and may even facilitate it.

One serious problem with this approach will be that of defining “persuasive.” For instance, if individuals are shown using and enjoying a product, will that have to be considered an attempt at persuasion? Or, if a product is displayed in a pictorially pleasing manner, will that be considered persuasive? Also, assuming this difficulty can be overcome in a reasonable manner, won’t the amount of regulation required necessitate the creation of a massive bureaucracy? It should be noted that corporations confronted with restrictions on persuasive advertising are likely to respond creatively in attempts to circumvent the rules.

An alternative approach would be to try to restrict the overall quantity of advertising without regard to a distinction between informational and persuasive types. It might be feasible to restrict the number of ads on TV to a certain number per hour, but can we do something similar with magazines, radio, and newspapers? Even if we had the will to do so, at least two serious problems remain:

1. a mere reduction in the quantity of ads (persuasive and otherwise) may not greatly lessen their impact in terms of selling the consumer lifestyle—especially in the absence of steps to counter this implicit content;
2. the difficulties in formulating and enforcing such restrictions would be formidable.

On the latter point, think about the enormous number of venues for advertising (currently existing as well as those that might soon be available) that we would have to regulate.

It is not easy to avoid drawing a pessimistic conclusion from the preceding remarks. Perhaps those more inventive than I can come up with proposals to restrict persuasive advertising that evade these problems and others like them. What cannot be evaded is the political reality that any proposed restrictions will be steadfastly and I suspect effectively, resisted by corporations and advertisers. On this score, the only hope may lie with the sorts of institutional changes sketched earlier. It is possible that a better educated populace with more democratic control over its corporations can take the necessary steps to curtail the suppression of autonomy effected by current mass-advertising.

NOTES


2. I will limit my claims to countries with schemes of political and economic organization like those in the United States. Obviously, my claims would have to be weakened or modified if they were to be made applicable to countries with significantly different institutions.


4. Lawrence Haworth, *Autonomy: An Essay in Philo-
Children as Consumers: An Ethical Evaluation of Children’s Television Advertising

Lynn Sharp Paine

Television sponsors and broadcasters began to identify children as a special target audience for commercial messages in the mid-1960s.\(^1\) Within only a few years, children’s television advertising emerged as a controversial issue. Concerned parents began to speak out and to urge the networks to adopt codes of ethics governing children’s advertising. By 1970, the issue had attracted the attention of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC received some 80,000 letters in support of a proposed rule “looking toward the elimination of sponsorship and commercial content in children’s programming.”\(^2\) Public attention to the controversy over children’s television advertising peaked between 1978 and 1980, when the FTC, under its authority to regulate unfair and deceptive advertising, held public hearings on its proposal to ban televised advertising directed to or seen by large numbers of young children. More recently parents have complained to the FCC about so-called program-length commercials, children’s programs designed around licensed characters.\(^3\)

As this brief chronology indicates, children’s television advertising has had a history of arousing people’s ethical sensibilities. In this paper I want to propose some explanations for why this is so and to argue that there are good ethical reasons that advertisers should refrain from directing commercials to young children. However, because so much of the public debate over children’s advertising has focused on the FTC’s actions rather than explicitly on the ethical aspects of children’s advertising, a few preliminary remarks are called for.

First, it is important to bear in mind that the ethical propriety of directing television advertising to young children is distinct from its legality. Even if advertisers have a constitutional right to advertise lawful products to young children in a nondeceptive way, it is not necessarily the right thing to do.\(^4\) Our system of government guarantees us rights that it may be unethical to exercise on certain occasions. Terminology may make it easy to lose sight of the distinction between “having a right” and the “right thing to do,” but the distinction is critical to constitutional governance.\(^5\) In this paper I will take no position on the scope of advertisers’ First Amendment rights to freedom of speech. I am primarily interested in the moral status of advertising to young children.

A second preliminary point worth noting is that evaluating the ethical status of a practice, such as advertising to young children, is a different exercise from evaluating the propriety of governmental regulation of that practice. Even if a practice is unethical, there may be legal, social, economic, political, or administrative reasons that the government cannot or should not forbid or even regulate the practice. The public policy issues faced by the FTC or any other branch of government involved in regulating children’s advertising are distinct from the ethical issues facing advertisers. The fact that it may be impossible or unwise for the government to restrict children’s advertising does not shield advertisers from ethical responsibility for the practice. Advertisers still respond.

Finally, I want to point out that public opinion regarding children’s advertising is a measure neither of its ethical value nor of the propriety of the FTC’s actions. Two critics of the FTC declared that it had attempted to impose its conception of what is good on an unwilling American public.\(^6\) There is reason to doubt the writers’ assumption about the opinions of the American public regarding children’s advertising,\(^7\) but the more critical point is the implication of their argument: that the FTC’s actions would have been appropriate had there been a social consensus opposing child-oriented advertising. Majority opinion, however, is neither the final arbiter of justified public policy nor the standard for assaying the ethical value of a practice like children’s advertising. As pointed out earlier, constitutional limits may override majority opinion in the public policy arena. And although publicly expressed opinion may signal ethical concerns (as I suggested in mentioning the letters opposing
commercial sponsorship of children's television received by the FCC, social consensus is not the test of ethical quality. We cannot simply say that children's advertising is ethically all right because many people do not object to it or because people's objections to it are relatively weak. An ethical evaluation requires that we probe our ethical principles and test their relation to children's advertising. Publicly expressed opposition may signal that such probing is necessary, but it does not establish an ethical judgment one way or the other.

... For purposes of this discussion, I will set aside the legal and public policy questions involved in government restrictions on children's advertising. Instead, as promised, I will explore the ethical issues raised by the practice of directing television advertising to young children. In the process of this investigation, I will necessarily turn my attention to the role of consumers in a free market economy, to the capacities of children as they relate to consumer activities, and to the relationships between adults and children within the family.

By young children I mean children who lack the conceptual abilities required for making consumer decisions, certainly children under eight. Many researchers have investigated the age at which children can comprehend the persuasive intent of advertising. Depending on the questions employed to test comprehension of persuasive intent, the critical age has been set as low as kindergarten age or as high as nine or ten. Even if this research were conclusive, however, it would not identify the age at which children become capable of making consumer decisions. Comprehending persuasive intent is intellectually less complex than consumer decisionmaking. Even if children appreciate the selling intent behind advertising, they may lack other conceptual abilities necessary for responsible consumer decisions. Child psychologists could perhaps identify the age at which these additional abilities develop. For purposes of this discussion, however, the precise age is not crucial. When I use the term child or children, I am referring to “young children”—those who lack the requisite abilities.

Children's advertising is advertising targeted or directed to young children. Through children's advertising, advertisers attempt to persuade young children to want and, consequently, to request the advertised product. Although current voluntary guidelines for children's advertising prohibit advertisers from explicitly instructing children to request that their parents buy the advertised product, child-oriented advertising is designed to induce favorable attitudes that result in such requests. Frequently child-oriented ads utilize themes and techniques that appeal particularly to children: animation, clowns, magic, fantasy effects, superheroes, and special musical themes. They may also involve simply the presentation of products, such as cereals, sweets, and toys, that appeal to young children with announcements directed to them. The critical point in understanding child-directed advertising, however, is not simply the product, the particular themes and techniques employed, or the composition of the audience viewing the ad, but whether the advertiser intends to sell to or through children. Advertisers routinely segment their markets and target their advertising. The question at issue is whether children are appropriate targets.

Advertising directed to young children is a subcategory of advertising seen by them, since children who watch television obviously see a great deal of advertising that is not directed toward them—ads for adult consumer products, investment services, insurance, and so on. Occasionally children's products are advertised by means of commercials directed to adults. The toy manufacturer Fisher-Price, for example, at one time advertised its children's toys and games primarily by means of ads directed to mothers. Some ads are designed to appeal to the whole family. Insofar as these ads address young children they fall within the scope of my attention.

My interest in television advertising directed to young children, as distinct from magazine or radio advertising directed to them, is dictated by the nature of the medium. Television ads portray vivid and lively images that engage young children as the printed words and pictures of magazines, or even the spoken words of radio, could never do. Because of their immediacy television ads can attract the attention of young children who have not yet learned to read. Research has shown that young children develop affection for and even personal relationships with heavily promoted product characters appearing on television. At the same time, because of their immaturity, these children are unable to assess the status of these characters as fictional or real, let alone assess whatever minimal
product information they may disclose. Technical limitations make magazine advertising and radio advertising inherently less likely to attract young children's attention. Consequently, they are less susceptible to ethical criticisms of the sort generated by television advertising.

Children as Consumers

The introduction of the practice of targeting children for televised commercial messages challenged existing mores. At the obvious level, the practice was novel. But at a deeper level, it called into question traditional assumptions about children and their proper role in the marketplace. The argument advanced on behalf of advertising to children by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA), and the American Advertising Federation (AAF) reflects the rejection of some of these traditional assumptions:

Perhaps the single most important benefit of advertising to children is that it provides information to the child himself, information which advertisers try to gear to the child's interests and on an appropriate level of understanding. This allows the child to learn what products are available, to know their differences, and to begin to make decisions about them based on his own personal wants and preferences. . . . Product diversity responds to these product preferences and ensures that it is the consumer himself who dictates the ultimate success or failure of a given product offering.18

The most significant aspect of this argument supporting children's advertising is its vision of children as autonomous consumers. Children are represented as a class of consumers possessing the relevant decision-making capacities and differing from adult consumers primarily in their product preferences. Children are interested in toys and candy, while adults are interested in laundry detergent and investment services. That children may require messages tailored to their level of understanding is acknowledged, but children's conceptual abilities are not regarded as having any other special significance. Advocates of children's advertising argue that it gives children "the same access to the marketplace which adults have, but keyed to their specific areas of interest."19

When children are viewed in this way—as miniature adults with a distinctive set of product preferences—the problematic nature of advertising to them is not apparent. Indeed, it appears almost unfair not to provide children with televised information about products available to satisfy their special interests. Why should they be treated differently from any other class of consumers?

There are, however, significant differences between adults and young children that make it inappropriate to regard children as autonomous consumers. These differences, which go far beyond different product preferences, affect children's capacities to function as responsible consumers and suggest several arguments for regarding advertising to them as unethical. For purposes of this discussion, the most critical differences reflect children's understanding of self, time, and money.

Child-development literature generally acknowledges that the emergence of a sense of one's self as an independent human being is a central experience of childhood and adolescence.20 This vague notion, "having a sense of one's self as an independent human being," encompasses a broad range of capacities—from recognition of one's physical self as distinct from one's mother to acceptance of responsibility for one's actions and choices. Normally children acquire these capacities gradually in the course of maturation. While this mastery manifests itself as self-confidence and self-control in an ever-widening range of activities and relationships, it depends more fundamentally upon the emergence of an ability to see oneself as oneself. The reflexive nature of consciousness—the peculiar ability of monitor, study, and reflect upon oneself and even upon one's reflections—underlies the ability to make rational choices. It permits people to reflect upon their desires, to evaluate them, and to have desires about what they shall desire. It permits them to see themselves as one among others and as engaging in relationships with others. Young children lack—or have only in nascent form—this ability to take a higher-order perspective on themselves and to see themselves as having desires or preferences they may wish to cultivate, suppress, or modify. They also lack the self-control that would make it possible to act on these higher-order desires if they had them.
Closely related to the sense of self, if not implicit in self-reflection, is the sense of time. Children's understanding of time—both as it relates to their own existence and to the events around them—is another area where their perspectives are special. Preschoolers are intrigued with "time" questions: "When is an hour up?" "Will you be alive when I grow up?" "When did the world begin and when will it end?" "Will I be alive for all the time after I die?" Young children's efforts to understand time are accompanied by a limited ability to project themselves into the future and to imagine themselves having different preferences in the future. It is generally true that children have extremely short time horizons. But children are also struggling with time in a more fundamental sense: they are testing conceptions of time as well as learning to gauge its passage by conventional markers. Young children's developing sense of time goes hand in hand with their developing sense of self. Their capacity for self-reflection, for evaluating their desires, and for making rational choices is ultimately related to their understanding of their own continuity in time.

Young children are in many ways philosophers: they are exploring and questioning the very fundamentals of existence. Since they have not accepted many of the conventions and assumptions that guide ordinary commercial life, they frequently pose rather profound questions and make insightful observations. But although young children are very good at speculation, they are remarkably unskilled in the sorts of calculations required for making consumer judgments. In my experience, many young children are stymied by the fundamentals of arithmetic and do not understand ordinal relations among even relatively small amounts—let alone the more esoteric notions of selling in exchange for money. Research seems to support the observation that selling is a difficult concept for children. One study found that only 48 percent of six-and-a-half- to seven-and-a-half-year-olds could develop an understanding of the exocentric (as distinct from egocentric) verb to sell. A five-year-old may know from experience in making requests that a $5.00 trinket is too expensive, but when she concludes that $5.00 is also too much to pay for a piano, it is obvious that she knows neither the exchange value of $5.00, the worth of a piano, nor the meaning of too expensive.

What is the significance of the differences between adults and young children I have chosen to highlight—their differing conceptions of self, time, and money? In the argument for advertising quoted earlier, it was stated that advertising to children enables them "to learn what products are available to know their differences, and to begin to make decisions about them based on [their] own personal wants and preferences." Ignore, for the moment, the fact that existing children's advertising, which concentrates so heavily on sugared foods and toys, does little either to let children know the range of products available or differences among them and assume that children's advertising could be more informative. Apart from this fact, the critical difficulty with the argument is that because of children's, shall we say, "naive" or "unconventional" conceptions of self, time, and money, they know very little about their own personal wants and preferences—how they are related or how quickly they will change—or about how their economic resources might be mobilized to satisfy those wants. They experience wants and preferences but do not seem to engage in critical reflection, which would lead them to assess, modify, or perhaps even curtail their felt desires for the sake of other more important or enduring desires they may have or may expect to have in the future. Young children also lack the conceptual wherewithal to engage in research or deliberative processes that would assist them in knowing which of the available consumer goods would most thoroughly satisfy their preferences, given their economic resources. The fact that children want so many of the products they see advertised is another indication that they do not evaluate advertised products on the basis of their preferences and economic resources.

There is thus a serious question whether advertising really has or can have much at all to do with children's beginning "to make decisions about [products] based on [their] own personal wants and preferences" until they develop the conceptual maturity to understand their own wants and preferences and to assess the value of products available to satisfy them. If children's conceptions of self, time, and money are not suited to making consumer decisions, one must have reservations about ignoring this fact and treating them as if they were capable of making reasonable consumer judgments anyway.
Children's Advertising and Basic Ethical Principles

My evaluation of children's advertising has proceeded from the principle of consumer sovereignty, a principle of rather narrow application. Unlike more general ethical principles, like the principle of veracity, the principle of consumer sovereignty applies in the specialized area of business. Addressing the issue of children's advertising from the perspective of special business norms rather than more general ethical principles avoids the problem of deciding whether the specialized or more general principles should have priority in the moral reasoning of business people.28 Nevertheless, children's advertising could also be evaluated from the standpoint of the more general ethical principles requiring veracity and fairness and prohibiting harmful conduct.

Veracity

The principle of veracity, understood as devotion to truth, is much broader than a principle prohibiting deception. Deception, the primary basis of the FTC's complaint against children's advertising, is only one way of infringing the principle of veracity. Both critics and defenders of children's advertising agree that advertisers should not intentionally deceive children and that they should engage in research to determine whether children are misled by their ads. The central issue regarding veracity and children's advertising, however, does not relate to deception so much as to the strength of advertisers' devotion to truth. Advertisers generally do not make false statements intended to mislead children. Nevertheless, the particular nature of children's conceptual worlds makes it exceedingly likely that child-oriented advertising will generate false beliefs or highly improbable product expectations.

Research shows that young children have difficulty differentiating fantasy and reality29 and frequently place indiscriminate trust in commercial characters who present products to them.30 They also develop false beliefs about the selling characters in ads31 and in some cases have unreasonably optimistic beliefs about the satisfactions advertised products will bring them.32

This research indicates that concern about the misleading nature of children's advertising is legitimate. Any parent knows—even one who has not examined the research—that young children are easily persuaded of the existence of fantasy characters. They develop (what seem to their parents) irrational fears and hopes from stories they hear and experiences they misinterpret. The stories and fantasies children see enacted in television commercials receive the same generous and idiosyncratic treatment as other information. Children's interpretations of advertising claims are as resistant to parental correction as their other fantasies are. One can only speculate on the nature and validity of the beliefs children adopt as a result of watching, for example, a cartoon depicting a pirate captain's magical discovery of breakfast cereal. Certainly, many ads are designed to create expectations that fun, friendship, and popularity will accompany possession of the advertised product. The likelihood that such expectations will be fulfilled is something young children cannot assess.

To the extent that children develop false beliefs and unreasonable expectations as a result of viewing commercials, moral reservations about children's advertising are justified. To the extent advertisers know that children develop false beliefs and unreasonable expectations, advertisers' devotion to truth and to responsible consumerism are suspect.

Fairness and Respect for Children

The fact that children's advertising benefits advertisers while at the same time nourishing false beliefs, unreasonable expectations, and irresponsible consumer desires among children calls into play principles of fairness and respect. Critics have said that child-oriented advertising takes advantage of children's limited capacities and their suggestibility for the benefit of the advertisers. As expressed by Michael Pertschuk, former chairman of the FTC, advertisers seize on the child's trust and exploit it as weakness for their gain.33 To employ as the unwitting means to the parent's pocketbook children who do not understand commercial exchange, who are unable to evaluate their own consumer preferences, and who consequently cannot make consumer decisions based on those preferences does indeed reflect a lack of respect for children. Such a practice fails to respect children's limitations as consumers and instead capitalizes
on them. In the language of Kant, advertisers are not treating children as "ends in themselves"; they are treating children solely as instruments for their own gain.

In response to the charge of unfairness, supporters of children's advertising sometimes point out that the children are protected because their parents exercise control over the purse strings. This response demonstrates failure to appreciate the basis of the unfairness charge. It is not potential economic harm that concerns critics; it is the attitude toward children reflected in the use of children's advertising that is central. As explained earlier, the attitude is inappropriate or unfitting.

Another frequent response to the charge of unfairness is that children actually do understand advertising. A great deal of research has focused on whether children distinguish programs from commercials, whether they remember product identities, whether they distinguish program characters from commercial characters, and whether they recognize the persuasive intent of commercials. But even showing that children "understand" advertising in all these ways would not demonstrate that children have the consumer capacities that would make it fair to advertise to them. The critical questions are not whether children can distinguish commercial characters from program characters, or even whether they recognize persuasive intent, but whether they have the concepts of self, time, and money that would make it possible for them to make considered consumer decisions about the products they see advertised. Indeed, if children recognize that commercials are trying to sell things but lack the concepts to assess and deliberate about the products advertised, the charge that advertisers are "using" children or attempting to use them to sell their wares is strengthened. Intuitively, it seems that if children were sophisticated enough to realize that the goods advertised on television are for sale, they would be more likely than their younger counterparts to request the products.

Harm to Children

Another principle to which appeal has been made by critics of television advertising is the principle against causing harm. The harmful effects of children's advertising are thought to include the parent-child conflicts generated by parental refusals to buy requested products, the unhappiness and anger suffered by children whose parents deny their product requests, the unhappiness children suffer when advertising-induced expectations of product performance are disappointed, and unhappiness experienced by children exposed to commercials portraying life-styles more affluent than their own.

Replies to the charge that children's advertising is harmful to children have pinpointed weaknesses in the claim. One supporter of children's advertising says that the "harm" to children whose parents refuse their requests has not been adequately documented. Another, claiming that some experts believe conflicts over purchases are instructive in educating children to make choices, denies that parent-child conflict is harmful. As these replies suggest, demonstrating that children's advertising is harmful to children, as distinct from being misleading or unfair to them, involves much more than showing that it has the effects enumerated. Agreement about the application of the principle against causing harm depends on conceptual as well as factual agreement. A conception of harm must first be elaborated, and it must be shown to include these or other effects of advertising. It is not obvious, for example, that unhappiness resulting from exposure to more different life-styles is in the long run harmful.

Research indicates that children's advertising does contribute to the outcomes noted. Certainly, child-oriented television advertising is not the sole cause of these effects, but it does appear to increase their frequency and even perhaps their intensity. I believe that a conception of harm including some of these effects could be developed, but I will not attempt to do so here. I mention this argument rather to illustrate another general ethical principle on which an argument against children's advertising might be based.

Conclusion

How might advertisers implement their responsibilities to promote consumer satisfaction and consumer responsibility and satisfy the principles of veracity, fairness, and nonmaleficence? There are degrees of compliance with these principles: some marketing strategies will do more than others to
enhance consumer satisfaction, for example. One way compliance can be improved is by eliminating child-oriented television advertising for children's products and substituting advertising geared to mature consumers. Rather than employing the techniques found in advertising messages targeted to children under eleven, advertisers could include product information that would interest adult viewers and devise ways to let child viewers know that consumer decisions require responsible decision-making skills. If much of the information presented is incomprehensible to the five-year-olds in the audience, so much the better. When they reach the age at which they begin to understand consumer decision-making, they will perhaps have greater respect for the actual complexity of their responsibilities as consumers.

The problems of child-oriented advertising can best be dealt with if advertisers themselves recognize the inappropriateness of targeting children for commercial messages. I have tried to show why, within the context of a free market economy, the responsibilities of advertisers to promote consumer satisfaction and not to discourage responsible consumer decisions should lead advertisers away from child-oriented advertising. The problem of what types of ads are appropriate given these constraints provides a challenging design problem for the many creative people in the advertising industry. With appropriate inspiration and incentives, I do not doubt that they can meet the challenge.

Whether appropriate inspiration and incentives will be forthcoming is more doubtful. Children's advertising seems well entrenched and backed by powerful economic forces, and it is clear that some advertisers do not recognize, or are unwilling to acknowledge, the ethical problems of child-focused advertising. The trend toward programming designed around selling characters is especially discouraging.

Even advertisers who recognize that eliminating child-oriented advertising will promote consumer satisfaction and consumer responsibility may be reluctant to reorient their advertising campaigns because of the costs and risks of doing so. Theoretically, only advertisers whose products would not withstand the scrutiny of adult consumers should lose sales from such a reorientation. It is clear that in the short run a general retreat from children's advertising would result in some lost revenues for makers, advertisers, and retail sellers of products that do not sell as well when advertised to adults. It is also possible that television networks, stations, and entrenched producers of children's shows would lose revenues and that children's programming might be jeopardized by the lack of advertisers' interest in commercial time during children's programs.

On the other hand, a shift away from children's advertising to adult advertising could result in even more pressure on existing adult commercial time slots, driving up their prices to a level adequate to subsidize children's programming without loss to the networks. And there are alternative means of financing children's television that could be explored. The extent to which lost revenues and diminished profits would result from recognizing the ethical ideals I have described is largely a question of the ability of all the beneficiaries of children's television advertising to respond creatively. The longer-term effect of relinquishing child-focused advertising would be to move manufacturers, advertisers, and retailers in the direction of products that would not depend for their success on the suggestibility and immaturity of children. In the longer run, the result would be greater market efficiency.

NOTES

Some notes have been deleted and the remaining ones renumbered.

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at a workshop on advertising ethics at the University of Florida in April 1984. I want to thank Robert Baum for organizing the workshop and to express my appreciation to all the workshop participants who commented on my paper, but especially to Katherine Clancy, Susan Elliott, Kathleen Henderson, Betsy Hilbert, Craig Shulstad, and Rita Weisskoff. I also want to acknowledge the helpful criticisms of Eric Douglas, Paul Farris, and Anita Niemi.

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